

Old Testament Lesson—Isaiah 7:1-16

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

As wonderfully moving and memorable as Mary's story is, it's...(and I hate to break it to you)...it's not terribly unique. It's just not—at least not Biblically speaking.

I mean—think about it. There's definitely a clear pattern in Scripture of God appearing in some form to a woman—a woman who, for one biological reason or another, isn't supposed to be able to have a child.

Then, after the Lord assures them that God can overcome any obstacle—be it biological or social or whatever—often following a time of initial skepticism that God can actually do this, a miracle takes place and a child is born.

Consider, for example, the birth of Isaac to parents, Abraham and Sarah. As the Bible tells it, Sarah was very "advanced in years"—tactfully reminding us "it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." Her and Abraham had been hoping and praying for a child of their own for decades, but with nothing to show for it.

After overhearing the Lord's promise to her husband that they'd conceive and bear a son, Sarah's understandably doubtful. She knows how old she is. She knows how old Abraham is. She even laughs at the ridiculous prospect!

But (according to Genesis) God asks, “Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” In other words: Is there anything the Lord can’t do? Is anything impossible with God? Lo and behold, at the appropriate time, Sarah indeed does conceive and bear a son. That child is named Isaac and the rest is history.

I could, of course, tell similar stories about Isaac’s wife, Rebekah—and Hannah and Elizabeth and—you get the point. And so, with each of these remarkable women, God’s powerful presence makes a way out of no way. God was with them—and that, my friends, makes all the difference.

Now, don’t get me wrong: the miraculous conceiving of a child by the Holy Spirit is absolutely monumental and groundbreaking. What happens here in Luke is nothing less than earth-shattering in terms of what it means for us and what it meant to Mary and her family.

Not to mention (by the way) that, here in our gospel lesson this morning, God chooses to work *with* and *through* a young woman—a young woman with next to no social standing or wealth or marketable skills.

Her greatest prospects would’ve been her cousin Elizabeth’s husband, Zechariah, who was a priest—along with her fiancée, Joseph. He, of course, was a carpenter and offered a humble means to provide for Mary and their potential children.

Outside of that, the truth is...Mary was unremarkable—no one special—not really. She would’ve been practically invisible to those in power. From the perspective of society’s elite, she didn’t matter all that much...just another young Jewish girl that would’ve been expected to get married and bear children.

In those days, unless you were a person of means or came from a wealthy family, a young woman didn’t have many options. Unless you were incredibly fortunate, a young woman of child-bearing age would’ve been expected to do just that. And, in most cases, *only* that.

And yet, by virtue of God’s presence and intervention, Mary is no ordinary young woman, is she? In fact, she is so *exceptional* that there would never be another woman like her—never again in the history of Creation!

No one ever again would bring the Son of God into the world and raise him. Never again would the Word be made flesh. No one else would have the unimaginable honor of becoming the mother of God.

To put it mildly, this is a big deal, y’all! It’s why Mary receives a visit from one of just a couple of angels in Scripture whose names we know.

The angel Gabriel comes to Nazareth with news that will not only change Mary’s life forever, but news that will literally alter the destiny of humanity—news that will enable everything and everyone to be redeemed—news that will put every single atom in the universe in right relationship with God.

“The Annunciation”: that’s what this story’s traditionally called—a great announcement to a virgin named Mary who will conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus (laughs).

I chuckle because that word—announcement—*announcement*, really? It just doesn’t seem to cut it, does it? I mean if this is an “announcement,” then I’ve got a “follicle” growing out of my head! Am I right?

I mean, yeah, I guess it’s technically true but—it sure doesn’t seem to grasp the gravity of what’s happening—just doesn’t describe the fullness of the truth. *Announcement—seriously?*

This is so much more than an announcement, people. This is pure gospel pouring into Creation for the first time. Is it even possible to wrap our minds around how significant this is?

It's almost inconceivable (eh, eh?!). This, my friends, is nothing short of the almighty power of God confronting each and every one of us.

Like her ancestor Sarah long before her, Mary bears witness to the indescribable—an angel of the Lord in her presence proclaiming new life in the most unexpected of circumstances. And like that ancient matriarch, Mary is a bit skeptical—perplexed—at least at first.

I mean, she's young—a girl by today's standards—but she clearly knows she can't possibly be pregnant. She's aware of the facts of life. She knows what has to take place before a baby can appear on the scene.

And yet—and yet: Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? No—according to Gabriel, nothing will be impossible with God. Your God—the God of Israel—will be with you—the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob will be your guard and shelter.

Your God Mary—the God of all mothers—the God of Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel and Hannah and your cousin Elizabeth will bring forth new life *from* you and *for* you. This God will bring forth from your womb a blessing to bless every mother's child after you.

Yes, Mary: The fabric of reality is going to change through you. You, favored one, are to give birth to salvation itself.

Of course, God had always been with Mary—just as God had always been with God's people since that first covenant with Abraham—ever since that first person was molded from the dust of a star long since extinguished.

As I'm sure you know, other Christian traditions around the world intentionally revere Mary a lot more than most of us Protestants do.

My favorite comes from the Eastern Orthodox church. They often describe Mary using the same language the Church did in its first few centuries. Christ's mother is the "Theotokos"—which means, the God-bearer. Mary is the bearer of God! "Theotokos" is a title of power and prestige and strength and might!

Pretty amazing for a lowly peasant girl wouldn't you say? Almost impossible, some might argue...

But here's the good news of the gospel, siblings in Christ: There is nothing too wonderful for the Lord. For nothing will be impossible with God. Friends: The Lord laughs at the very idea of impossible.

Immanuel is coming. And with his arrival, we'd do well to expect the unexpected. We'd do well to reimagine what we're capable of in God's presence and with God's help.

Yes, Mary is the one with child. But soon and very soon, that promised child will be with us too. He will be born and sleep in a place where animals eat—a trough where they put their hungry mouths—which, is fitting I think, because this child still feeds us—still feeds our hungry hearts and souls today. A manger and (perhaps) the world's first Communion table...

Yes, there is no one like Mary. Her story is profoundly unique. She is the "Theotokos"—the God-bearer. This humble girl bears Christ. And yet, so do we. We can all bear Christ. We can all bring forth the impossible and the miraculous because it is the power of God working through us. It is Immanuel walking alongside us.

This is her story—Mary's story. But it's our story, too. Christ can be born in our hearts every single day.

But, of course, changing the world is hard, we say. Doing what's right is hard. Pushing back on the status quo is hard. The tasks before us feel next to impossible.

And so we become cynical and doubtful and skeptical—hopeless even. We make all sorts of excuses...How can this be, since I am a virgin? How can this be, since I'm so young—

since I'm so old? How can this be, since I don't have much money? How can this be, since I don't know much about that? How can this be, since I don't have much time—since I'm so tired? How can this be since...you fill in the blank.

We hear it from Genesis to Revelation: Nothing is impossible with God.

How can this be? Because God will be with us—because Immanuel is coming.

How can this be? It will be. Let it be. Let it be with me according to your word.

Amen.